

Passion for Our Pentecostal Past: The Path to a Promising Future

by Darrin J. Rodgers

Are the “golden oldies” worth playing again? To put it another way, does the past teach us anything of value for the present? These are very important questions.

The Assemblies of God was organized in order to better channel our Pentecostal passions in productive directions. Our founding fathers and mothers recognized the need to bring unity, accountability and structure to the young and sometimes chaotic Pentecostal movement. Since the first General Council in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1914, the Assemblies of God has aimed to provide a mature, biblical voice within Pentecostal and evangelical Christianity.

We are living in unsettled times, with much cultural and social change. Many in the church, in their desire to be relevant, have changed their message and methods. Sometimes these changes can compromise biblical truth. How can we help ensure that the Assemblies of God stays the course and continues to encourage innovative ministry while sharing the unchanging truths of the gospel?

I believe the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center -- the archives, museum and research center of the Assemblies of God -- is perfectly situated to help provide our Fellowship -- and the broader Christian world -- with tools that will help extend the light of the gospel to future generations.

You see, it is important to realize that history has spiritual value. History gives us a record of God’s faithfulness, which gives confidence that God will provide for the Christian’s and the church’s needs in the present. Moreover, having a sense of how God has worked across time and across cultures is essential if Pentecostals are to survive the prevailing cultural currents. Pentecostals must be rooted in the larger Church, spanning the ages and cultures, in order to withstand the fashions and winds of doctrine that may be expedient in the short term but destructive in the long term.

Hundreds of millions of people have been touched by God through the Pentecostal movement. The World Assemblies of God Fellowship alone now counts over 55 million adherents.

The mission of the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center is to document how God has worked through the Assemblies of God and the broader Pentecostal and charismatic movements, over the years and right up to the present, across the ethnic, social, geographic, and political divides. We then make this heritage accessible to church leaders, scholars, historians, students, and to you -- through our website, Assemblies of God Heritage magazine, our products, and in our Research Center in Springfield, Missouri.

History as Testimony

Did you know that Pentecostals often have incorporated history into their services without realizing it? Pentecostals love to give testimonies -- to testify of how God saved, healed, and delivered them. The testimony is actually a form of history-telling.

This is appropriate, because Christianity stands on the precept that God acts in history. The testimonies of God's people throughout the ages are holy history. The Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center is charged with the sacred task of preserving these stories. Examples of the faithfulness of people like Alice Reynolds Flower, Stanley Horton, and C. M. Ward -- and God's faithfulness to them -- are not alone. This theme is repeated countless times in Scripture, Christian history, and the more recent Pentecostal past.

These and other Pentecostal pioneers were in on the ground floor of something larger than themselves. God changed their lives, and they impacted eternity by touching others. They were among the earliest members of a movement that has changed the face of Christianity in one century. Their stories need to be told.

Dangers to the Church

There is a danger to the Pentecostal church today -- that we will either be swamped by a generic form of evangelicalism, or that the faith handed down to us will be redefined by some of the extreme, extra-Biblical teachings found in the fringes of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements.

Unfortunately, many people in the West seem to have fallen victim to a form of spiritual myopia - - an inability to see beyond their immediate surroundings and to learn from the wisdom of the ages. Values that parents and grandparents deemed essential are today devalued. Materialism, hyper-individualism, and selfishness, under the guise of sophistication and individual rights, are tearing at the fabric of our families, churches, and broader society.

It has been said that he who marries the spirit of the age will soon be a widower. When current fads pass away, I pray that we, too, won't pass away because our identity has become so intertwined with the latest fashions. We don't want to be flash-in-the-pan Pentecostals!

Early Pentecostals claimed that their very reason for being was to restore the historic, biblical church. Banners, hanging in some of the first Pentecostal tabernacles, quoted Hebrews 13:8: "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today and forever." Christianity, in its DNA, seems to require a commitment to history. To paraphrase author G. K. Chesterton, Christianity, with its insistence upon looking back to move forward, "is the only thing that saves a man from the degrading slavery of being a child of his age."

History as Part of the Solution

In order to stay the course charted by our Pentecostal forbearers, we might think that all we need to do is read the Bible, letting the unchanging truths of the gospel cleanse and shape our minds. And of course, that is indeed at least a part of the remedy. But this is not sufficient, because there are fashions in the church as well as in the world. We tend to read the Bible through the distorting lens of whatever happens to be the current Christian, evangelical, or Pentecostal fashions. So unless we're endowed with an extreme independence of mind, even our understanding of the Bible is going to be cramped and skewed by what C.S. Lewis has called the "narrowness of (our) own age and class."

By learning how other Christians, across time and across cultures, applied the faith, we will be confronted by aspects of biblical truth that simply never struck us before, but which were blindingly obvious to others. History can inspire us to ask questions we never would have thought of asking by ourselves, but which may have been the boiling questions of the hour in another time or place.

History should provoke and stimulate us to reflect on what, in our Christianity, really is timeless truth, and what is just a passing fashion in our own day.

This is why preserving and sharing our Pentecostal heritage is essential; it gives perspective that helps ensure our survival into the future.

How does a person put history into practice? I would suggest that one can start by reading the testimonies of the saints, including those faithful Christians in one's own family, and by sharing those stories with the next generation. The job of the historian, according to Grant Wacker, is "to resurrect the dead and let them speak." That's our job at the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center -- to give voice to those who came before.

The Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center is one of the largest Pentecostal archives and museums in the world. Many scholars and church leaders, when writing about the Pentecostal movement, first do their research at the FPHC. Supporting our work is a tangible way to affirm our inspiring heritage and to help others learn from the wisdom of those who came before.

The Altar Call

This is my heart's cry -- that Pentecostals learn from and appreciate their heritage -- not so that we can live in the past, but in order to move wisely into the future. Having this broader perspective is essential as Pentecostals plot their way forward, thinking critically and creatively in order to reach the people in this present age.

If you found yourself saying, "Amen, Brother Rodgers," while reading this, I encourage you to take the following actions:

- 1) Pray for the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center and its staff, that we might continue to preserve and share our heritage, in order to impact the future of our faith;
- 2) Pray for the Assemblies of God, the broader Pentecostal movement, and all Christians, that they may be faithful to the faith once handed down for all;
- 3) Share this message with your pastor, friends, and family;
- 4) Donate historical materials (books, tracts, periodicals, photographs, etc.) documenting the Pentecostal movement to the FPHC; and
- 5) Contribute financial resources to the FPHC endowment (or place the FPHC in your will), to help ensure the long-term future of this ministry of remembrance.

Please contact me if you would like to find out more about how you can help the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center to preserve and share our heritage. I would love to hear from you!

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